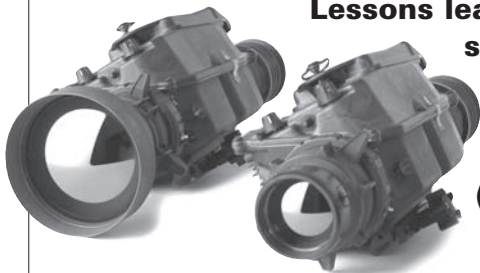


The Rapid Fielding Initiative

COL Gregory J. Fritz



Lessons learned from *Operation Enduring Freedom (OEF)* revealed serious shortcomings in soldier and unit equipment. As a result, in November 2002, the Product Manager Clothing and Individual Equipment (PM CIE), began identifying commercial-off-the-shelf (COTS) and government-off-the-shelf (GOTS) solutions to meet these shortfalls.

The PM worked directly with the next brigade on its way to Afghanistan — 2nd Brigade, 82nd Airborne Division (Abn. Div.) — to prepare a list of equipment that soldiers and units needed for their mission in the rugged terrain and harsh climate of Afghanistan. The success of this initial effort between the PM and the deploying brigade commander became known as the Rapid Fielding Initiative (RFI) and served as a catalyst for subsequent units deploying both to *OEF* and *Operation Iraqi Freedom*.

In the months that followed, the remaining brigades of the 82nd, plus the entire 101st Airborne Division (Air Assault) and 10th Mountain Division (Light Infantry) have also received RFI equipment. RFI has been a tremendous success because it provided thousands of articles of mission-essential equipment to deploying units in a matter of weeks and months instead of the traditional years-long acquisition process. PM CIE, in close cooperation with deploying unit commanders, HQDA, the U.S. Army Training and Doctrine Command

(TRADOC) and the Army Test and Evaluation Command (ATEC), secured the funding and safety releases necessary to provide pallet loads of equipment at an unprecedented rate. As a result, thousands of soldiers deployed to Afghanistan and Iraq with significantly enhanced lethality, survivability and comfort.

Several pieces of RFI equipment have been especially significant in soldier survivability. The Interceptor Body Armor, which increased a soldier's protection from exploding fragments and shrapnel to ballistic protection against rifle-fired ammunition, has been credited with dozens of documented cases of saving soldiers' lives. The Advanced Combat Helmet has also been documented in protecting soldier's lives from AK-47 shots that previously would have killed them.

While much of the RFI equipment was harvested from COTS and GOTS production lines, the Advanced Combat Helmet was expanded from the Special Forces Multi-Integrated Combat Helmet

program. This is just one example of PM CIE's innovative approach to meeting operational shortfalls for deploying units. Another example is the Military Operations in Urban Terrain kits that were adapted from traditional firefighting equipment to provide a rapid solution for the 101st Abn. Div.'s operational requirement for fighting in Iraqi cities and villages.



RFI also provided combat optics, sensors, lasers, night vision devices and thermal weapons sights to enhance soldier and unit

lethality. This required some purchases above the basis-of-issue-plan (BOIP) and some adjustments to the Department of the Army Master Priority List (DAMPL). Thankfully, the compelling urgency of hostilities in Afghanistan and Iraq compressed the approval of beyond BOIP procurement and out-of-DAMPL sequence fielding so deploying units received the equipment they needed in a few short months, rather than the traditionally long process.

RFI not only provided the equipment, but also training and

logistical support for the new equipment. Upon HQDA notification, Program Executive Office Soldier (PEO Soldier) and PM Soldier Equipment arranged immediate coordination with the next-deploying unit to tailor their list of required equipment, from the previous unit's template to their unique mission requirements. HQDA then provided the funding for PEO Soldier to procure this equipment on an accelerated schedule. PEO Soldier also arranged for direct shipment of thousands of articles of equipment directly to the deploying units' home station, or in some cases, directly to the theater distribution point. Representatives from PEO Soldier then deployed to Fort Bragg, NC; Fort Campbell, KY; and Fort Drum, NY; to field the equipment to soldiers and train them in its use just before their deployments to Afghanistan and Iraq. As a result, soldiers and units were far more survivable and lethal in the harsh terrain and climate of these countries.

Additionally, RFI equipment enabled soldiers and units to "own the night" from their mounted weapons platforms and from their individual night observation devices and individual and crew-served thermal weapons sights. And when the infamous Iraqi sandstorms blinded nearly every imaginable sensor and weapon platform, these individual and crew-served thermal weapons sights were the only devices known to cut through the sand and provide limited visibility when all else was obscured by the intense sandstorms.

ATEC was a key player in RFI's accelerated timelines, providing materiel safety releases in fractions of the traditional testing process. TRADOC also assisted with documentation of operational needs and coordination of basic and unit-specific requirements.

HQDA and, specifically, the Deputy Chief of Staff G-3 and G-8, provided the resources and prioritization necessary to procure all equipment in a timely manner. But much of the success for RFI is attributable to unit commanders and their noncommissioned officer support channel who articulated the operational necessity for RFI equipment before deploying into harm's way.

Because of RFI's success, PEO Soldier has already been notified by HQDA to initiate coordination with four additional brigade combat teams to provide

them with RFI equipment in the months ahead. Additionally, PEO Soldier is working closely with HQDA to formalize plans for providing RFI equipment to the rest of the Active Component plus enhanced brigades from the Reserve Component as well. RFI has been a tremendous success, providing soldiers and units with equipment that enhanced their survivability and lethality across the operational spectrum. RFI has significantly improved the trust and cooperation between warfighters and the acquisition community as well as HQDA, TRADOC and ATEC. This close cooperation will serve as a model for future acquisitions, providing direct and timely feedback for Army modernization investments and significantly compressing the timeline for putting mature technology into the hands of soldiers. RFI preserves America's fighting forces' technology overmatch and boosts every soldier's and unit's survivability and lethality. RFI has been a tremendous opportunity for the Army and industry to provide soldiers and units the equipment that otherwise had been procured "out-of-pocket." With continued cooperation, prioritization and resources, RFI will continue to provide American soldiers the fighting edge that they deserve.

COL GREGORY J. FRITZ was the PM Soldier Equipment at the time this article was written. He has since retired. He has a B.S. from the U.S. Military Academy, an M.S. from the Florida Institute of Technology and a Master of Strategic Studies from the Army War College. Fritz has also earned diplomas from the Defense Language Institute and the German General Staff College, Hamburg, Germany.

